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ABSTRACT

The influence of question format on item responses is examined using split ballot techniques and sex-role stereotypes in a junior college sample. Two formats were used: direct, in which questions asked only about women, and comparative, in which items explicitly compared women with men. Significant differences by format occurred on seven out of eight stereotypes. Students rated women more favorably when direct rather than comparative steretoype items were used. However, relationships between stereotypes and other variables were similar, regardless of format. Explanations for these results and implications for attitude research are discussed. (Author)

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QUESTION FORMAT AND SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES

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For several decades, researchers have shown that the wording of attitude questions can influence survey results. Considerable research on question format appeared from the 1930's to the 1950's. Following the early 1950's, research on this issue became relatively quiescent, only to resurface during the 1970's.

Early studies on question wording often involved finding "rules for writing good questions." Using split ballot techniques in which random subsamples received different versions of an item, issues such as including "neutral" responses or using "allow" versus "forbid" were explored (e.g., Payne, 1951; Rugg, 1941). Other work concerned tendencies to agree with general statements regardless of content ("yeasaying") or motives which predisposed respondents to give socially desirable answers (e.g., Couch and Keniston, 1960; Crowne and Marlowe, 1960; Rorer, 1965; Striker, 1963).

Some recent question format studies resemble these perspectives (e.g., Jackman, 1973). However, other new research investigates more subtle issues. Earlier, it was often believed that the effects of question wording occurred because survey questions at best were crude tools attempting to measure complex phenomena like prejudice. Many researchers believed that different forms of an item still measured the same underlying constructs. The concept of the "format-resistant correlation", i.e., similar correlations between a given item and other variables regardless of format differences, reflected this belief (Presser and Schuman, 1975; Riesman and Glazer, 1949; Suchman and Guttman, 1947).

More recent researchers have suggested that, rather than being crude tools, survey questions may in fact be more sensitive than the concepts these questions measure. Two quotes well illustrate this perspective:

> The amazing sensitivity of surveys to slight variations in question wording is strong evidence that responses are far from random. Surveys are a remarkably sensitive measuring device--if we only knew what we were measuring (Davis, 1976: 33).

> ...the public responds to questions, not to constructs, and public attitudes may not even be well-represented by the constructs that sociologists frequently start from. Individual respondents often see differences between questions that investigators regard as essentially similar (Schuman and Duncan, 1974: 250)

Thus, these researchers suggest that even relatively "small" changes in question wording can reflect subtle differences in the issues that survey questions attempt to measure.

The present study combines perspectives from both earlier and more recent approaches to question format. The influence of two types of question format is examined with a split ballot experiment on sex-role stereotypes with a junior college sample. The results are analyzed with respect to "yea-saying", the social desirability of questions, and whether different versions of the "same issue" in fact measure different concepts.

Methods of Stereotype Research

Five formats commonly used in stereotype studies are presented below. Formats (1) through (3) are most frequently used with college students, while (4) and (5) are used with student and general population samples.

(1) Checklists in which individuals select the "appropriate" adjectives for a group from a list of traits (e.g., Cowan and Stewart, 1977).

(2) Circling the percent of group members thought to possess a certain characteristic (e.g., Brigham, 1973).

(3) Rating the group via a semantic differential (e.g., Broverman, et al., 1972; Cowan and Stewart, 1977).

(4) Presenting statements about group characteristics with which individuals agree or disagree (e.g., Osmond and Martin, 1975).

(5) Questions which compare a given group with other groups (e.g., Tavris and Jayaratne, 1972).

The present study analyzes methods (4) and (5) which have been used on a wider range of populations. Here, format (4) is further delineated and defined as a "direct format" item. Direct items ask only about the stereotypic group. Usually the respondent agrees or disagrees with a simple statement about group characteristics, e.g., "career women generally are neurotic" (Osmond and Martin, 1975). An alternative version of this format is a direct question, e.g., "do you feel that being a mother is a special calling from God?" (Scanzoni, 1972). The critical component in direct items is that the group that is rated is considered in isolation.[1]

"Comparative format" items explicitly compare one group with another. The rater's own group or a dominant group are usually used as comparison points. Comparative items sometimes are agree-disagree questions (e.g., "men are more capable of assuming leadership than women," Osmond and Martin, 1975). More frequently, the rater is asked if a given trait is more true of one group, more true of the comparision group, or equally true of both groups (e.g., Tavris and Jayaratane, 1972).

The few controlled studies of stereotype format have found differences by question wording. Less stereotyping occurs when students are asked to spontaneously list characteristics of a given group than when checklists or semantic differentials are the measuring instruments (Ehrlich and Rinehart, 1965; Cowan and Stewart, 1977). Stereotypes are more prevalent when forced choice items rather than adjective checklists are used (Sherriffs and McKee, 1957). When more dominant comparison groups are provided in the stereotype format, stereotypes of a less dominant group become more pronounced (Diab,

1963). There is also evidence that direct format stereotype items have a stronger inverse relationship with education than comparative items (Hesselbart, 1975; Presser and Schuman, 1975).

Thus, there is ample evidence that stereotypes (as well as other attitude measures) are influenced by question wording. Substantive reasons for why this occurs are usually mentioned in post hoc explanations. The most common explanation appears to be that some question formats make stereotypes of a given group more salient than others (Cowan and Stewart, 1977; Ehrlich and Rinehart, 1965).

Yea-saying, Social Desirability, and Distinct Concepts

In this paper, three a priori explanations are considered in relation to stereotypes and question wording which have received attention on other attitude measures. In early formulations, "yea-saying" was considered to be a personality trait related in some way to conformity (e.g., Couch and Keniston, 1960). Later work found that acquiescence response set occurred more often on difficult to read or moderately worded items and was more common among poorly educated respondents (e.g., Striker, 1963; Campbell, et al., 1960). It has been suggested that college may teach individuals to disagree with any general statement, regardless of content (Campbell, et al., 1960).

The latter perspective implies that well-educated (e.g., college educated) individuals should be likely to disagree with stereotype statements either positive or negative about a given group. Thus, the extent of agreement with statements such as "women are kind" should be similar to agreement with statements such as "women are vain", and both positive and negative statements should receive low rates of endorsement among well-educated individuals.

Social desirability has also been conceptualized as a personal trait, or a motive to present oneself in a way to win social approval (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960; Phillips and Clancy, 1972). In this study, the motive approach is combined with a more situational perspective. Social desirability is viewed in part as situationally dependent on the wording of attitude statements (e.g., Striker, 1963).

Well educated persons often wish to present themselves as tolerant toward women or ethnic minorities. This perhaps "surface" tolerance sometimes erodes when more subtle methods such as projective tests (Spence and Helmrich, 1975). or a "bogus pipeline" technique (Sigall and Page, 1971) are used. The finding that direct items have stronger inverse correlations with education than comparative items (see above) coupled with the phrasing of these two formats suggests that comparative items may be more subtle at measuring hidden prejudices than direct items. For example, an individual who says that men are more reasonable than women can defend him/herself against accusations of prejudice by pointing out that women are reasonable too (just less so than men). By contrast, someone who agrees that women are unreasonable does not have such an easy "tolerant" defense.

This perspective on social desirability and question format implies that a more negative portrayal of a group will occur when that group is explicitly compared with a more dominant or favored comparison group. Especially when negative stereotypes of a group are involved, well-educated persons should stereotype more frequently on comparative than direct items.

Yea-saying and social desirability approaches set up expectations for how response distributions may differ by comparative and direct question formats. By contrast, the "distinct concepts" issue mentioned earlier (e.g., Schuman and Duncan, 1974) does not directly address response distributions. Rather, the argument is that if different formats for an item reflect different concepts, then relationships between an attitude item and other variables will also differ by question format. There is not really enough prior theory or research to specify for stereotypes the extent of correlational differences by format.

A Note on Sex-Role Stereotypes

This topic is particularly timely, since attitudes toward men and women appear to be undergoing many changes in recent years (e.g., Mason, et al., 1976; Orcutt, 1975). There is also evidence that sex-role attitudes are sensitive to the techniques used to measure them (e.g., Spence and Helmrich, 1975).

Common female-valued (desirable) stereotypes about women portray them as sensitive, sociable, artistic, and tidy. Male-valued stereotypes portray men as logical, ambitious, and decisive. Negative stereotypes about either sex usually either (1) accentuate positive traits ("hard-headed" for men, "high-strung" for women) or (2) imply men or women lack desirable cross-sex traits (men lack sensitivity, women lack ambition; Sherriffs and McKee, 1957; Broverman, et al., 1972). Most studies find more male than female valued traits, suggesting the lack of desirable cross-sex traits is considered a more serious omission for women than men. In fact, the "lack" of male-valued traits among women is sometimes used to explain women's lower status in marketplace or other activities.

METHODS

Subjects

The subjects were 119 north Florida junior college students (64 women, 55 men). Students completed surveys during introductory sociology, anthropology, and English classes.[2]

Procedure

Stereotype items were embedded in a general "social problems" survey. Except for the stereotype manipulation, all surveys were identical. Students were split into two random subsamples. Each of eight stereotypes was rated only once, using either a direct or comparative format. Thus, each student received:

(1) two direct female-valued items (sensitivity and getting along with others or being artistic and understanding)

(2) two comparative female-valued items (see (1) above)

(3) two direct items implying women lack male-valued traits (being logical and decisive or being career-committed and good at leadership)

(4) two comparative male-valued items (see (3) above)

Both positive and negative statements about women were used to assess yea-saying and social desirability. Using two negative statements implying women lack male-valued traits is congruent with some research mentioned earlier. A check of sex, race, age, other demographic variables and several attitude items revealed no significant group differences indicating that experimental randomization procedures were effective.

FINDINGS

Item Distributions

Table 1 presents items and percentage distributions for the stereotype questions.[3] On direct format items, there is high agreement that women possess

(Table 1 about here)

desirable feminine traits. For example, 80 percent at least "somewhat" agreed with the sensitivity item[4] (Group One) while 62 percent agreed with the artistic item (Group Two). However, on direct male-valued items, students rejected statements implying that women lack desirable male traits. For example, only one third agreed women are not decisive (Group One) or are poor leaders (Group Two).

Results on the direct items suggest that "nay-saying" among a well-educated (student) population is far more prevalent on negative than on positive stereotypes. Generally, agreement is twice as high on statements which say "nice" things about women than on those which suggest women are "deficient." Thus, even if "yea-saying" reflects personality traits, the content of questions plays a great role in whether individuals will say "yes" or "no."

A different picture emerges for comparative items. On female-valued items, far fewer students stereotyped on comparative than direct items. Only 39 percent felt women were more sensitive than men (Group Two) and only 22 percent felt "being artistic" was even "a little" more true for women (Group One.) However, on male-valued items, the reverse occurred: students stereotyped more on comparative than on direct items. Over half the sample felt men make decisions more easily, are better leaders or more career-committed.

Table 2 compares the percentage stereotyping by trait and format. On

(Table 2 about here)

direct items, agreement scores as stereotypic. For female-valued comparative

items, rating women more sensitive, artistic, understanding, or better at getting along is scored as stereotypic. For male-valued comparative items, rating men more logical, decisive, good at leadership or career-committed is scored as stereotypic.

Table 2 shows two distinct patterns. First, format makes an appreciable different (20 to 51 percent) on seven of eight items. Second, women are rated more negatively on comparative items. The students stereotyped less on female-valued comparative items and more on male-valued comparative items than when the direct format was used. Thus, the overall effect is to portray women quite favorably on direct items but to downrate women in comparison with men.

The pattern of direct and comparative responses lends support to the situational "social desirability" of questions in this college sample. When the questions probe more subtly at prejudice (as may occur with comparative stereotype items), the tolerance shown by students on direct questions abruptly decreases. Perhaps the direct format allows individuals to sidestep the issue of whether women are equal to men, while the comparative format insists that individuals confront the equality issue explicitly.

Correlations by Trait and Format

The "distinct concepts" approach suggests that these stereotype items should not only exhibit different response distributions, but should also relate differently to other variables. In order to test this approach, four indices were built; each one consists of two items. The indices were (1) female-valued direct; (2) female-valued comparative; (3) male-valued direct and (4) male-valued comparative. Table 3 presents correlations within each index and across these.

(Table 3 about here)

Three of four within index correlations are moderately high (r = .37 to .43). However, correlations across indices are low (all under .20, none significant at the .05 level). The results in Table 3 suggest that (1) different formats for the "same" stereotypes measure different concepts and (2) only when content and format are similar does moderate response consistency occur.

If different formats tap different concepts, these stereotype indices should also differ in their correlations with other variables. Table 4 presents

(Table 4 about here)

correlations between the stereotype indices and five other variables.. "Prefer Male Dominance" is the mean score received to four (four point) agree-disagree items about husbands making family decisions, equal pay or equal work for women, and approval of the Equal Rights Amendment. "Prefer Traditional Family" is an equally balanced item asking whether in one's own family, a mother of small children should stay home, work part-time or work full-time. An "information" scale, "Perceived Male Success", is the mean score of four (five point) items asking which sex (or both equally) is more apt to become state governor, have high income jobs, advanced degrees, or become high level executives. Mother's education and student's political orientation (a seven point very liberal to very conservative item) were also included.

In Table 4, scores on either female-valued index are unrelated to other variables. However, students who stereotyped more on either male-valued stereotype measure were more likely to be self-identified conservatives, have less educated mothers, prefer male dominance and a traditional family. Thus, for male-valued stereotypes only, greater stereotyping is related to more traditionalism on other variables. Generally, correlations between both male-valued

indices and other variables are similar in magnitude and indeed appear to be "format resistant" correlations.

One exception to these "format resistant" correlations occurs with the "Perceived Male Success" variable. Only the comparative male-valued stereotype index relates to this variable: those who see men as more privileged also view them as superior. Unfortunately, both indices here share a common comparative format, rendering this finding ambiguous. Although tenuous, however, this finding contrasts with the pattern of other correlations in Table 4 and is congruent with those researchers who argue that different question formats measure different substantive issues.

A Note on Replication

It is interesting to note that several findings in this paper generalize beyond this student sample. A later general population sample of a north Florida urban area (, 1977) found that respondents were more likely to endorse positive traits about both blacks and women using a direct format and more likely to endorse positive traits about whites and men when a comparative format was used. In the later sample, correlations between stereotypes and other variables differed considerably by stereotype format. Thus, the results presented here seem neither specific to a student population nor to only gender-related stereotypes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has focused on the role of item wording on sex-role stereotypes and the relationship between question format and yea-saying, social desirability, and the possibility that different wording reflects different substantive

concepts. The results reaffirm earlier research which finds that format is an important factor in response patterns. Response differences by format appear especially critical in parameter estimations, i.e., determining which traits are stereotypic and the extent of stereotyping responses. For studies which use stereotype measures as one criterion to split subjects into groups for further study, these results have the obvious implication that "prejudice" can be "situationally determined" by item phrasing. These results also signify a warning to researchers who indiscriminately compose lists of items or who rely almost exclusively on agree-disagree measures (even when reversals are used).

The results indicate that "nay-saying" among comparatively well educated respondents may only be a problem when statements derrogatory to a given group are used. Content appears to be the issue when direct stereotype formats are employed.

On the other hand, the pattern of direct and comparative responses suggests that social desirability is a sensitive issue among these students. Students agreed with complimentary statements about women and disagreed with derrogatory ones using a direct format. When comparative items were used, female-valued traits usually were ascribed equally to both sexes, but male-valued traits were seen as more true of men by substantial proportions of the sample. It is possible that comparative items are better at detecting more subtle prejudices among individuals who are sensitive to appearing "tolerant." The compounding of social desirability and question format may be one explanation why more educated respondents appear more tolerant on direct-type items, but <u>not</u> more tolerant than less educated persons when comparative items are used.

In this sample, it is unclear whether different stereotype formats really measure different substantive issues. With one exception, correlations by stereotype content (male or female valued) with other variables were similar, regardless of format. It is possible that student samples are homogenous enough that not enough variability occurs to judge correlational differences by format. It is also possible that these two different measures of stereotypes in fact measure the same underlying construct.

This research and other controlled studies of question format and attitude measurement cited earlier open many Pandora's boxes. At a time when surveys are both proliferating and coming under attack, it might seem a relief to leave the lids of the boxes closed. However, given the proliferation of surveys, polls, and attitude questionnaires over the past decades in basic and applied research, as much information as possible on the influence of item wording is needed. This study is one example of a renewed attempt to clarify the tools of attitude measurement.

Table 1

Stereotype Item Percentage Distributions

	A[a]	SA	SD	D
Direct: Group One (minimum N = 60)				
Women's sensitivity can shed new light on many of today's problems.	31%	49	12	8
Most women seem to be very good at getting along with others.	22%	44	27	7
Women tend to respond more to emotional appeals than to logical presentations.	20%	32	36	12
Women often have trouble being decisive on important issues.	8%	25	35	32
Direct: Group Two (minimum N = 58)				
Women tend to be artistically inclined.	17%	45	14	24
Generally, one quality about women is their understanding of others.	15%	33	24	28
Most women are not really very committed to having a career.	9%	16	43	32
Although there are exceptions most women aren't really very good in leadership roles.	14%	19	24	43

Comparative questions:
Here are some characteristics mentioned about people. For each one, mark whether you think the characteristic is a lot more true of men (LTM), a little more true of men (LITM), a lot more true of women (LTW), a little more true of women (LITW) or equally true of men and women (EQL).

Group Two (minimum N = 58)	LTM	LITM	EQL	LITW	LTW
sensitivity	3%	2	56	22	17
getting along with others	0%	3	81	14	2
being logical	12%	28	55	5	0
making decisions easily	12%	42	41	3	2
Group One (minimum N = 59)					
being artistic	0%	7	71	19	3
understanding of others	2%	3	71	22	2
being committed to a career	24%	32	44	0	0
good at leadership	19%	37	44	0	0

[a] Agree; SA = Somewhat Agree; SD = Somewhat Disagree; D = Disagree

Table 2
Percent Giving Stereotyped Responses by Trait and Item Format

	FORMAT: Direct	Comparative	DIFFERENCE	Z[a]
TRAIT:				
sensitivity	79.9%	39.7%	40.0%	4.40**
getting along with others	66.1	15.5	50.6	5.56**
artistic	62.1	22.0	40.1	4.41**
emotional-logical	52.5	39.7	12.8	1.39
understanding of others	48.3	23.7	24.6	2.76**
(not) decisive	33.1	53.4	-20.1	-2.21*
(not) good at leadership	32.2	55.9	-23.7	-2.60**
(not) career-committed	24.6	55.9	-31.3	-3.44**

[a]test for the difference between proportions in independent samples

*p < .05

**P < .01

Table 3

Correlations Among Stereotype Indices[a]

	FEMALE VALUED:		MALE-VALUED	
FEMALE-VALUED	Direct	Comparative	Direct	Comparative
Direct	(.43)[b]			
Comparative	.07	(.09)		
MALE VALUED				
Direct	.16	.02	(.37)	
Comparative	.05	.14	.17	(.41)

[a] High scores indicate more stereotyping.

[b] Correlations are Pearson's r. Figures in parentheses are average correlations for items with the same format and same direction (male/female valued).

Table 4

Correlations Between Stereotype Indices and Other Variables[a]

STEREOTYPES:	FEMALE-VALUED		MALE-VALUED	
	Direct	Comparative	Direct	Comparative
OTHER VARIABLES:				
Political Orientation	-.03	-.06	.31**	.32**
Mother's Education	-.11	-.07	-.19*	-.22*
Prefer Male Dominance	.14	.06	.39**	.23**
Prefer Traditional Family	.17	.04	.28**	.29**
Perceived Male Success	-.06	-.12	.04	.30**

[a]High scores indicate more stereotyping, high mother's education, conservative political orientation, high preferred male dominance, traditional family style, and high perceived male sucess.

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

FOOTNOTES

1. This type of item typically allows only degrees of agree or disagree responses. "Don't know" and "other" responses are coded but not solicited. This procedure is followed in the present study. Eliminating middle responses may well constrain answers (e.g., see Schuman and Duncan, 1974). This heightens the importance of contrasting direct with comparative format items which usually include an explicit "equally true" or middle alternative.

2. Although this is not a probability sample, these students are probably representative of this campus since the sample courses are part of a "Liberal Studies" requirement. As noted, students were randomly assigned to experimental conditions and significance tests are used to denote differences between experimental conditions.

3. Fifteen out of 16 questions reveal no sex differences in response nor did sex differences occur on subsequent analyses in these data. Thus, data presented are pooled for both sexes.

4. The "sensitivity" direct item is "double-barrelled"; however, the effect is probably to underestimate agreement since one could agree that women are sensitive but not that their sensitivity "sheds new light on many of today's problems."

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